

Shortgrass Country Train Mishap Is Reminder Of Pre-Railroad Days

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MERTZON — Recent local action has centered on a train wreck between our ranch and town. Four cars were derailed a couple of days ago; bulldozers and extra shifts of railroad hands have been working day and night clearing the wreckage.

Interruptions in the railroad service don't affect our community. Trucks do most of the freighting. The main contribution of the railroad is the excitement resulting from the occasional prairie fires that start in the railroad right-of-way.

Before the rails were laid out here, ranchers did have a struggle in marketing their livestock. Trail bosses ran as high as \$25 per month. Mules, harness and axle grease were equally out of line.

Remember, too, that in those days the income tax was yet to be invented. The oldtime herder couldn't whip out his pencil and take a tax deduction every time a wagon wheel broke, or a bunch of waddies ate up a 100 pound sack of beans. Ranch expenses were dead weight and tax advantages were unknown.

Rustlers presented another constant hardship for trail drivers. In those times, the margin of profit was high enough to inspire thieves to steal any four-legged beast they thought was sufficiently healthy to withstand the shock of a running iron.

Cow thieving was solved in the poorest possible ways. The old granddad cowmen didn't know a thing about rehabilitating outlaws. Furthermore, they never considered the constitutional rights of lawbreakers. Budding criminal careers were terminated at the end of a swinging rope, and I don't think anyone ever bothered to read the bill of rights to the honorees of the hanging festivals. In fact it took 60 years before man became sufficiently educated and civilized to give the lawless element an upper hand.

Buying feed and borrowing money wasn't easy, either. During many dry years, thousands of unmortgaged cattle fell over in their tracks. Countless dollars in collateral were allowed to die without so much as smelling a feed sack. The wildest dreamers couldn't envision that the railheads were going to bring the day when a man could owe more borrowed money to a feed store than four gold mines could start to pay off.

The pioneers, as you surely know, were perfect models for bronze statues, but they were flat dumbheads when it came to deficit financing.

How they managed their money is difficult to explain. You see, their money was worth the face value. Twenty dollar gold pieces were actually worth that amount. Somebody must have had a chart or graph around the house to find the answer to financial computations. It seems that our modern minus monetary system would have been much easier to figure. I know I'd hate to have to sit down and work out what a bundle of 110-cent dollar bills are worth. Working on our one-third basis is far simpler.

But the arrival of the railhead ended that era. Market centers were opened, and steam powered engine hauled cattle to faraway points. Feed was imported. Bills of credit and demand notes were added to the scene. Progress and all its glories was on the march.

You know the story from then on. The Shortgrass Country will never be able to repay the railroads for linking us to the rest of the world. Think how dreary it must have been when all a cowman had to show for a year's work was a little sack of gold buried under his cabin floor.